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The Musicality of Traumatic Memories: **A Video Essay**

Oswald Iten

Abstract: This video essay attempts an audiovisual analysis of subjectively motivated sounds and music in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) based on Danijela Kulezic-Wilson's ideas about "film musicality" and "integrated soundtracks".

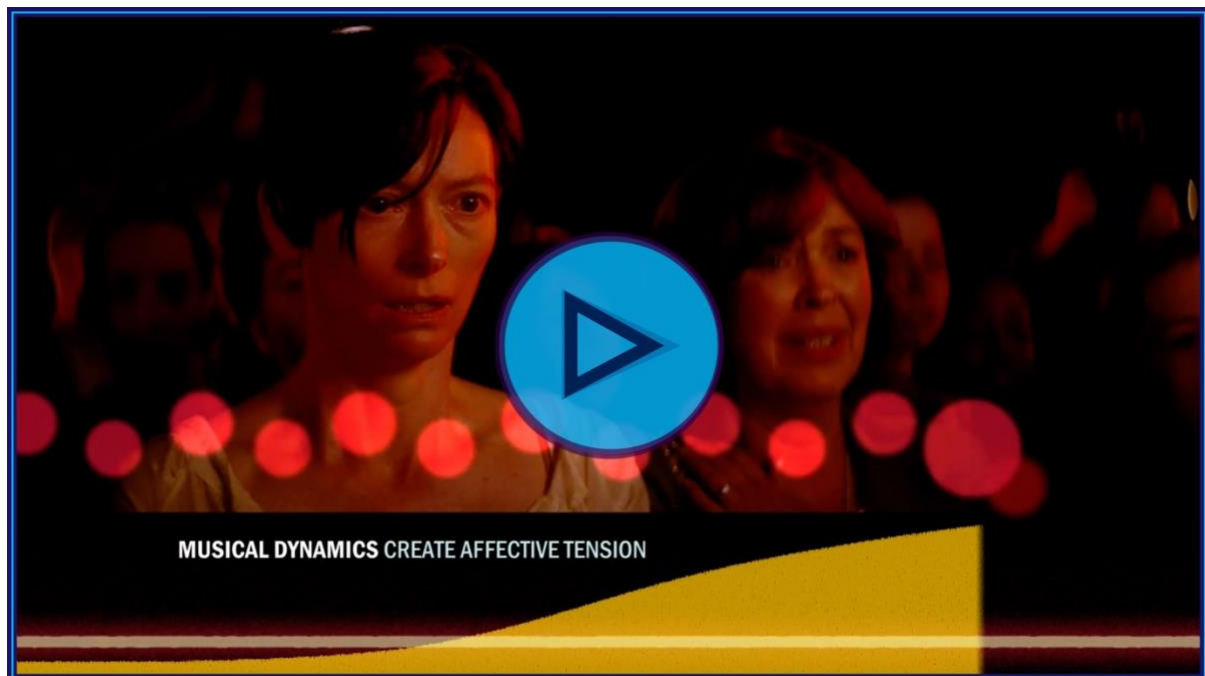


Figure 1: *The Musicality of Traumatic Memories* (Oswald Iten, 2024). Screenshot and link to video essay.

In Lynne [Ramsay]’s films sound brings the pictures alive and is able to offer that entrance to an interior world of the subconscious and emotion that the visuals by themselves have difficulty in approaching. (Paul Davies, sound designer of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, qtd. in Albrechtsen)

The flow of Eva’s associative stream of consciousness in Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) had always felt to me like it was conceived according to musical rather than narrative principles. But what exactly does musical mean in a film without a melodic score? How can you describe the film’s overall flow or rhythm? I had tried to answer these questions long before I discovered Danijela Kulezic-Wilson’s writings. But once I read *The Musicality of Narrative Films* (2015) and *Sound Design is the New Score* (2020), her work became a cornerstone of my research. There it was, all laid out by a brilliant musicologist, bringing together many of my interests in an open theoretical framework.

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Kulezic-Wilson only mentioned *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in one sentence of *Sound Design Is the New Score* (36). Nevertheless, Ramsay's film looked like ideal material for applying the musicologist's ideas to a videographic analysis. Besides, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* has a lot in common with Darren Aronofsky's π (1998) which Kulezic-Wilson had studied in considerable depth (*Musicality of Narrative Films* 137–57). Both films put us, the audience, in the heads of disintegrating protagonists and exude a “general feeling of discomfort and anxiety” supported by nonmelodic drone scores. Both films rely on the “repetition of visual and sonic refrains throughout the film” (156, 157; both quotes refer to π), and in both π and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, picture and sound editing are intricately entwined. But while audiovisual synchronicity is paramount in π , much of the oneiric and unsettling effect of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is due to asynchrony.

In making the video essay *The Musicality of Traumatic Memories* I wanted to maintain a degree of ambiguity present in the film's story and its audiovisual telling. I found it quite a challenge to add external elements. I wondered, how do I visualise a chafing noise so that it does not draw attention to its unseen source? How do I emphasise asynchrony when my animation creates the closest onscreen synchronisation imaginable? If you only consciously hear a noise because of its visualisation, would you still call that audiovisual relationship redundant? Moreover, how do my voiceover narration and written quotes change the perception of a film, when the film deliberately avoids both of these devices despite being based on an epistolary novel? It soon became clear that I had to integrate most of the quotations into my own narration so as not to break the video essay's flow. Therefore, in contrast to the original film, my video essay unfortunately reinstates the hierarchy of speech that the original film so boldly attempted to break.

Conversely, re-editing *We Need to Talk About Kevin* was easy because of its asynchronous, “lateral, oblique”, and “inappropriate” sounds (Paul Davies qtd. in Albrechtsen). Apart from the opening montages that I used to prime the audience for some of the key sounds, I tried hard not to mislead the audience. But then I needed to consider how I would find a rhythm for an essay about rhythm itself. While I picked up on the associative nature of Ramsay's nonchronological storytelling, I built the overall structure around the escalation of Eva's relationships: first to herself (00:02:14), then to her husband, Franklin (00:07:23), her son, Kevin (00:11:10) and, finally, the incident that traumatised her (00:16:05). These chapters were not designed to be noticed, but rather to bring order and a human element to the analysis, thus keeping the argument from sprawling in too many directions.

Obviously, looking for musicality in the form of subjectively assigned patterns opened up quite a few rabbit holes for me. This was especially true for sequences in which several memories aggressively compete for our attention. Once I had started to visually chart some of the seemingly diverging sonic and visual patterns, I found that, on a higher level, a whole set of synch points would emerge, constituting a new overarching rhythm. At first, I wanted to visualise those (clearly unintentional) patterns as well. But once you have discovered something like a fractal structure, where would it stop? The deeper I looked, the more it dawned on me that the openness of Danijela Kulezic-Wilson's concept of film musicality could easily derail my analysis. It suddenly made a lot of sense that she herself often came back to Aronofsky's π , a film about a man obsessively chasing patterns.

At the end of her reworked case study of π , Kulezic-Wilson wrote that “[a]part from the ‘analytically measured’ aspects of π 's musicality [...], there are also those that exist on the perceptive level inaccessible by analytical tools and verbal description” (*Musicality* 157).

Ultimately, by conveying audiovisual experiences, *The Musicality of Traumatic Memories* is an attempt to make exactly those perceptive aspects accessible to analysis. After all, they are crucial in creating our experiential proximity to an otherwise emotionally distant protagonist.

Familiarity with a piece of music usually deepens our relation to it. The same is true for my engagement with *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. No matter how often I immerse myself in it, I am never able to shake off the complex emotions triggered by its disturbing ending, that total lack of catharsis for Eva. Looking back at my video essay now, I wonder whether I subconsciously wanted to give Eva a way out of this by adding that framing device in which she puts her head through the looking glass and in the end back out again. While I originally designed this framing device as an “entrance to an interior world” for the audioviewer, it certainly feels appropriate as a gesture that provides some release for Eva (Davies qtd. in Albrechtsen).

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Oswald Iten is a Swiss film scholar and video essayist with a practical background in hand-drawn animation. Currently, he works on a PhD project about the audiovisual representation of subjective experience in contemporary feature films. He is part of Johannes Binotto’s research group “Video Essay: Futures of Audiovisual Research and Teaching” at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts where he also teaches in the animation department. Iten is particularly interested in the relationship between sound and image, as well as colours and editing. He also works part-time in a cinema.